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## Writing Sample

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Includes "DE PROFUNDIS," "ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF CARSON MC CULLERS," "A BRIDAL GOWN," "THE GENTLE FIRE CROWNED BY HER VOICE," and "AROUND A CUBAN POET IN ONLY TEN MINUTES."

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## Norge ESPINOSA

## DE PROFUNDIS

*In carcere et vinculis*

May less charity be bestowed upon me, may they not come  
to give me prosperity, to offer light and mud,  
those dead friends, the aggressive gendarmes  
who they devour each verse and each embrace, and who are beautiful.  
Let me be should I write but on the sides of cells  
and don't have for lover but a crow, and a breed  
of rains until the end. And may the shade be  
the only confidant, the one delayed and signed,  
the parade in which they will see  
one after the other my pretexts, falling. One after another:  
all my dusky exaltation.

If I have said Beauty it is because yes, I go pale  
off a cliff to the point where I succeed in not dying.  
If I have yearned for a shirt, a dinner and a dungeon  
it is because I have barely been the Comedian: that would have been the least.  
If they'll have seen me crying and I fall short of remedy,  
don't call my mother. May the captain not come.  
I always say *de profundis*. And I have chosen to end up  
this way, feeling  
the rose of an atrocious desire, martyring myself.

## ON THE OCCASION OF THE DEATH OF CARSON MC CULLERS

Another will be the age, another will come in the farewell,  
when a city anguishes us so much, half-lit and uninhabited.  
The wind that tells nothing of the pretexts for this anguish  
won't return to whisper above your pages either.  
What horrible levity  
in those innocent days,  
when the brass, the coins, have fallen before your books  
and the last water runs through the prisons  
where you could have been, composing those novels  
that I won't want to read.  
Lina de Feria, having told you  
of Mc Cullers's death, how solemn that afternoon.

Lina de Feria, what blow before the dinner  
of the son that returns and leaves and doesn't know  
how you can confirm the resistance  
how your verses rise, so that the farewell  
can be the shape of your door through which  
the same animal always comes to bite its regret.  
Cadavers, cadavers,  
one city is destroyed;  
another gains contours in what you draw.  
We speak of these deaths without mentioning the blood,  
with the indolence of those who look to sink a cathedral.

## A BRIDAL GOWN

*That is why I do not raise my voice, old Walt Whitman,  
Against the boy that writes  
A girl's name on his pillow,  
Nor against the boy who dresses as a bride  
In the dark of the closet.*

*Federico García Lorca.*

With what mirrors  
with what eyes  
will this blue-handed boy look at himself  
with what umbrella he will dare to cross the cloudburst  
and the path of the ship toward the moon  
How he will be able to  
How he will be able to this way dressed as a bride  
if void of breast is his heart  
if he has no painted fingernails if his fan is only made of dragonflies  
how will he open the door without affectation  
to greet the friend waiting for him under the almond tree  
not knowing the almond tree abducted his girl leaving him alone  
oh where can he go this way so blond and blue so pale  
to count the birds to request appointments per broken telephones

with only half of himself    the other half belonging to the mother  
from whom to whom he will have stolen that gesture    that caprice  
those yellow lids    that voice that once was the sirens'

Who

will turn off the light under his bed and will paint his breasts with which  
he dreams

who will arrange the wings of this bad angel    made up of jeers  
if to his wings the wind has condemned him    and who groan  
who    who will take them off    on what grass or handkerchief  
to slap his stomach    to spit on his legs  
to this long haired boy    dressed thus    as a bride

With what mirrors

with what eyes

will the pupils be changed    of this boy who once wanted to call himself Alicia  
who excuses himself    and passes the blame to the stars  
with what stars will he be able to adorn his    thighs  
with what rods will he hold them up  
with what quill he will write their confession    oh    this boy  
with a bride's gown in darkness    he is bitter and doesn't want to leave    doesn't dare  
doesn't know    which    of his mosses    lost its confidence  
doesn't know who will caress him from some other park  
who will give him a name

with the one who can come and silence the doves

to kill them    so they'll pay for his insults

with what mirrors oh with what eyes

will he be able to frighten himself    this boy

who has not wanted to learn    a single whistle for the students girls

the girls that laugh    he cannot kill them

thus    in a bridal gown    gagged by crickets

always across the bridge    always across the cloudburst

always in a faulty phone    doesn't know the number

doesn't know himself either

Is lost in a fitting and doesn't have scissors

thus    in a bridal gown    as in a pact with the dawn nearing

With what mirrors

With what eyes.

## THE GENTLE FIRE CROWNED BY HER VOICE

A girl,  
A feast offered to be eaten in my gardens,  
Has no idea how much pain her thighs bring me.  
She suffers with her birds  
of a hunger I fail to stop, a terrible hunger  
far from the bread *I slice on a solitary table* \*  
far from a light not cast by my poem  
blame the violin, blame that music  
which from the eyes down to the paper is coming unraveled.

A girl like that,  
a girlfriend so settled in her evenings  
who leaves me peace and my broken confinement,  
not makes me leap the waves of wine,  
not comes to ask for help with what she dreams..  
not comes to break my loneliness  
The gentle fire crowned by her voice.

*\*José Martí*

**AROUND A CUBAN POET IN ONLY TEN MINUTES**

Can I speak about Cuba in only ten minutes? Of course I can, for of course we can talk about any country in ten minutes, or even less. But the question I'm asking myself here is whether we can talk about a country that is trying to preserve its history as if it were a museum of a living problem, and whether I will be able to, by the forms and ways of literature, to express that condition, that troublesome misunderstanding, which has been read from so many angles. Perhaps that is too much for a single and a not too powerful an island--there are so many others in the world.

If every country has a secret, an unspoken key containing all the essences of its identity, Cuba has first shown and then hidden its password in the last forty years, in very different ways. Policy, war, music, abstinence, resistance, dignity and stoicism, narrative, movies, exile. In and out, exile and in-style, as Cuban poets like to say, whether these words are published or not in the space of the nation. How many Cubas are there? I mean, how many Cubas are there in that atomized geography that is our planet at this moment.? A Miami Cuba, a Spanish Cuba, a New York or a Venezuelan Cuba, a Russian Cuba, even an Iowa one. It is against the voices that would want to prevent from speaking those who, in these different and fragmented spaces of the world, live and talk in Cuban, *en cubano*, that my words here are written. Against and yet also with those same voices, because the main trouble with Cuba as well as these other Cubas has been the persistent denial of a dialogue between points on a single map. A growing map, to be sure, but yet a Cuban map which is shedding its petrified variant and becoming a plural expression of what it actually means to live in *cubano*, in a Cuban way, taking pleasure in *cubano*, suffering in *cubano*, writing in *cubano*, wherever you are, wherever you want to be. This is a question, I know, of basic freedoms, and I myself wonder whether I can speak to it without mentioning a political word or a political name. As a writer, my weapons are my life and my metaphors. That is all I have to express the way I live on that multifaceted island. An island not disconnected from the world but one that, at times, needed to try to not hear what the world wanted to say about it. Yet isolation was a concept that a country without boundaries, a lonely country, should have put up with and made sense of for its own good.

I belong to a generation of young Cuban writers who appeared on the national cultural landscape in the last days of the 1980ies. I don't need to belabor what those days mean in our memories. For Cubans, this was a time of a reactive utopia, socialist style. What we wrote was the proof of that utopia. True, a critical proof, a non comfortable speech about our joys and miseries, our conquests and our losses. We were the sons of a Revolution which had made a ritual of personal sacrifice, and we were talking about that ritual, about the blood and death of all sacrifices, and about the lights of a Promised Land that we couldn't see. That is why our books created some sort of ideological explosion. We wanted to be heard, but no one wanted to hear our arguments or discuss them in a neutral tone. It was a critical moment, and all the fantasies of a public debate about the old mistakes and new needs of the Cuban revolution were exposed. First, the painters went to the streets of the capital with incredible performances attempting to break the academic boundaries and to provoke a different dialogue with the audiences—the normal and non- contaminated audience who had, perhaps, never has been to a museum or a high art space. Later, the poets

and narrators took their place with irreverent pages. The same process, I know, was occurring in other countries with a socialist prehistory, and was of course a symptom. The petrified body wanted to rise its hands, to use different words, to ask itself whether it really was alive. We wanted to provide that different answer. Unfortunately, not all of us remain today on the island to find out just how different those answers were.

Maybe I don't need to spell out just how freakish we were for the cultural powers of that time. I am certain that they had no idea what to do with us. We were reading books that had been prohibited to almost that same power group: José Lezama Lima, a verbal monster who had created the Orígenes group, a Catholic sect of poets, painters, musicians and critics in the 1940s, was the resurrected hero. Born and dead in Cuba, he spent his last years in official ostracism which caught on to others among his friends: the playwright, poet and novelist Virgilio Piñera, a friend and rival of Jorge Luis Borges and the author of splendid work; Reynaldo Arenas, who went to exile in 1980 after long years of unpublished novels and short stories, and of persecution, Gaston Baquero, a magnificent poet and journalist who had had been living in Spain since 1959, etc. In 1966, Lezama had published *Paradise*, an unclassifiable work at once a poem and a novel, a challenge to anyone who has since then taken up writing in a Cuban idiolect. But the unclassifiable condition of that magical book was immediately linked to its sensuality, or more precisely, its pansexualism. Like Bosco's famous painting *The garden of joys*, *Paradiso* was a world at once demonic and bucolic. A world apart. So he too was, literally, placed apart.

But we were reading these books, and asking about those who had been "aparted." Poets like Dulce María Loynaz (a fantastic survivor of a devastated past), Delfín Prats, Rafael Alcides or Lina de Feria, narrators like Manuel Granados, Anton Arrufat or Cabrera Infante, playwrights like José Triana or the same Arrufat, moviemakers like Nicolás Guillén Landrián, painters like Antonia Eiriz (the most important name of Cuban expressionism) or Servando Cabrera Moreno, the author of very explicit homoerotic works... We decided that it would be they who would be our contemporary partners, our parents. Some of them came back into public light without any need for revenge. Others died, yet others left the country almost immediately. But they gave us a legacy to protect. We made a connection to them because they had the same doubts about life, policy, art and destinies that so many years later, we came to share. They paid for those doubts with silence, we wanted to pay that price with our cries and shouts. We were irreverent, problematic, angry, loud people. But since then, whether we liked it or not, a spectrum of voices, tones, issues, was appearing among us. We were a non-homogenous generation. A crowd with but a single mirror, Cuba, but with a thousand faces.

In 1990 that mirror was almost smashed. What was referred to as the "Special Period in Time of Peace"—an euphemism, of course—came into our lives suddenly, and left us without answers. In a matter of seconds the socialist camp was transformed into an astonished desert and we thus became some kind of inexplicable oasis in its middle.. Most of the dialogues that we had started were now absorbed into a new mechanism of silence, a wall of silence that we couldn't break through -- whether with our criticisms, with our demands or even with our triumph to have been allowed to go public at last. With no paper in the country, the publishing houses closed. The magazines closed too, and the crisis was a crisis of words, and ideas, with no exits. However, there were those who did find their own way out, and running away from the island was the first and desperate solution that all too many people

took. In 1994, the Cuban Sea was the tunnel, the airport, the cemetery for people who decided to go. Like in the 1960s, like in the 1980s, history came back to our homes, with empty spaces for the names of bodies that we lost. The survivors' names and the bodies of those who, with amazing good luck, did arrive to other lands are the new faces of the multicultural and multilateral Cuba, and survivors too, wherever they are, of the melancholia or the nostalgia that the original Cuba gave them.

Since 1995 the country has tried to recover. The government has opened a discreet dialogue with the Cuban diaspora and with the religious voices on the island. An island that survives thanks to a capitalist economy based in turn on its tourist potential, an island still full of propagandistic formulae, an island that has no chances and yet insists again and again on the incorruptible soul of our social project. Incredible things are happening. The visit of the Pope, or our president unveiling a John Lennon statue—these are not predictable events in a country where, only a few years ago, believers had no right to study or pursue some careers, where rockers and even Beatles fans were expelled from their schools. The culture has generated a shell of sorts to protect the work of several artist, creating right now a space for discussion into which some of the hardest questions are admitted. . Feminism, the literature of expression of gays and sexual minorities, race troubles, the vision of those in exile—these are just some of them. Among the most noteworthy vision of the current Cuban problems are the dramatists (Abilio Estevez, now also a celebrated novelist; Alberto Pedro, Raul Alfonso, to name a few), and their plays have been staged in Miami, Havana or Spain. But our ministers and bureaucrats usually don't go to the theater, nor do they read our magazines, so they are letting us play our roles as long as we do it with abstinence or veiled allusions. Shoemakers stick to their shoemaking, as Albert Camus remarks in *Caligula*, his famous play, and one of the most successful productions of the last years in Cuba. A Cuba ready to sell its stereotypes, but there is, too, the secret Cuba that the light mind of a Spanish philosopher, Maria Zambrano, saw in the eyes of Jose Lezama Lima.

For everything there is a chance, or else nothing is changing. Maybe this is not a question well served by extreme positions, as Cubans like to think. Maybe this is a question, and time, for different points of view. A case of survival, and not one of life vs. death.. The actual literature, the art that we are creating in Cuba today, is a very polymorphic equation, a body with several mouths and hands. Some of them are still calling out, some of them have nothing to say. Some of that forbidden generation are now the winners of the National Prize of Literature: the country has rehabilitated them and their works can again be found in bookstores. Virgilio Piñera is now the most prophetic voice we hear, and one of his terrible poems, *The island carrying its weight*, is like a log book for us: in these powerful stanzas he described the delirium, the dream, the nightmare, or even the insomnia that can be the meaning of living in Cuba today. A Cuba that we share and that we destroy in each poem, each novel, each letter, each film and each sound and silence that we sign, day after day.

Is my time over? Is this all I can say? Why? Why haven't I spoken about the beauty of this island, or its magnificent beaches, or about the fascinating joys of the human bodies which it contains? And why have I not spoken about the tradition of struggles for freedom that we have so proudly demonstrated to the rest of the world? I have my answers to all that, and maybe those answers exists because I'm here, in Iowa, outside the noise of *cubanidad*, outside the rhythms that I carry always, as part of me. Out of the heat, out of the same dialogues and readings, trying to breathe this frozen air and to understand the colors of this season which remind me of the old



days in Russia, the old days of an impossible snow. The youngest generation of Cubans doesn't want to talk about some of these things, or doesn't even know them: they have just turned eleven, twelve, fifteen or twenty, and see a sea (our boundary) as hope. All of what my generation saw as an utopia is to them wasted time. So we try to talk to them with different words because we don't want to lose them. They are our future audiences, the future readers of the nothingness or else the richness that we are already writing. Writing the richness or nothingness of a Cuba so plural, so dispersed, so different and yet so tied to a single root of music, desire, struggle, silence and secrets. A country prepared in its persistent own way to understand itself, for better and worse. A verbal country, a musical country, a living country which I can feel in the sounds of this river, in the words that I won't say, in the limits of this time when I was able to remember it in all your faces, asking me for the same secret, the future, that any country, any one country, keeps and which it makes grow on its poetry, on its name and its body. A future into which, like into a non perfect and enchanted mirror, we glance every morning, in every life.